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RECENT THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

SOME MODERN ESTIMATES OF JESUS

Recent developments have disclosed in a somewhat painful way to German theological scholars how great the distance is between them and the rank and file of the church people. A result of this discovery has been a quite unusual activity on the part of the scholars to popularize their point of view by means of lectures to the people. While the outcome will doubtless be the peaceable fruits of righteousness in the end, for the present it is grievous for the lecturers. Ecclesiastics, with their stationariness, respectability, and fear lest the foundation be removed, and their weapons of misinterpretation and ridicule, are doing their best to pre-occupy the minds of the people against the scholars of Germany and annul their influence. In not a few instances these violent assaults upon the lecturers have led them to publish their lectures in self-vindication.

Such was the case as regards the book under review.¹ In the winter of 1902-3 Weinel delivered these six lectures in Solingen, setting forth his scientific and religious views concerning Jesus. The attack came as usual, bitter enough; then the book. In the first lecture Weinel traces the destruction of the traditional portrait of Christ—*Christusbild*—by historical criticism. The ecclesiastical press treated Weinel as if he were responsible for the process of disintegration, whereas he merely described genetically what had been consummated by Reimarus, Paulus, Lessing, Strauss, Bauer, and the modern theology. In the second lecture he views Jesus as *Reformator* of ethics and cultus in the light of liberalism—here passing under review the works of Renan, the free-religious movement, and Egidyaner Wolfgang Kirchbach. The third lecture is devoted to Jesus in the light of the social question (Richard Wagner, social democrats, Christian socialism). For the fourth, Weinel discusses Jesus in the light of the *Kulturproblem* as preacher of a Buddhistic self-redemption (Schopenhauer, Wagner, theosophists, Nietzsche, Naumann, Haeckel). In this he is especially vigorous in urging that Jesus was no weary, nervous decadent with pain-drawn countenance, but a veracious, heroic man, full of tenderness and kindness, his heart filled with a victorious faith in God. "All

¹ *Jesus im neunzehnten Jahrhundert.* Von Heinrich Weinel. Tübingen und Leipzig: Mohr (Siebeck), 1903. iv+316 pages.

that is nobly human and natural is not his foe, but inwardly akin to him." Was Jesus a foe to art? No, for he was a poet. To science? By no means, for back of everything else as presupposition of scientific work there must be veraciousness and courage, of which Jesus was the embodiment. It is not Christian material that makes a Christian art, but the way in which all this material is viewed; and—would that our American churches might lay this to heart!—it is not the ecclesiastical or "Christian" results that make a science Christian, but the sincerity and integrity of the work and the courage which seeks and says the truth. As to Buddhism, the gospel is not a Buddhistic self-redemption, not a philosophy, but faith in the Father, yearning for redemption from guilt through the Father's forgiveness, and hearty love for men which impels us to work for them and against pain of every kind.

The last lecture treats of the religious question of the present; and the positions appreciated are those of Tolstoi, Chamberlain, Harnack, Rosegger, Bourrier, Schell. Here, too, the standpoint of the author himself grows more distinct. It is that no dogmatic affirmations concerning Jesus can be made, consistent with the gospel, which are inconsistent with Jesus' *real* and *full* human nature. True Weinel does not say this in so many words; but what he says amounts to this. And in this Weinel is right; for otherwise we have no sure criterion for the valuation of Jesus, who, moreover, would else be more or less of a spook or phantom in history; and the marble coldness of his dogmatic sinlessness as a donation could not command our respect ethically, nor stir and thrill our hearts redemptively. To avert panic, it may be added at once that, given our modern conception of immanence, and the divineness of Jesus follows as a matter of course; and that, given personality as principle of world-evolution, and the consequent possible gradedness of the free expression of that principle makes room for the possibility of both the ontological and ethical incomparableness of Jesus in actuality. The question of his dignity then comes to be one of fact.

But this brings me to remark upon what in Weinel's addresses was most objectionable of all to the church party. In connection with New Testament conceptions of Jesus, Weinel (p. 282) raises the question: "Did Jesus on his own part regard himself as more than a man, and how high up in the scale of beings did he place himself? The question has agitated men's minds from the beginning. And yet"—here is the offense—"it is, in my opinion, a scientific duty to confess that we can no longer answer it with certainty." To this Professor James Denney, in *The British Weekly* (April 7, 1904), in a spirited review, not without a touch of the tragical,

replies: "If we really found ourselves in this position, it would be a scientific duty to make the further confessions, that, so far as it has a religious character involving a confession of Christ, the Christian religion has gone astray from its birth, and that if it is to have a place in the world of the future, it must radically change its character." Is this true? Even if it is, does it constitute a refutation of Weinel? We cannot adjudicate a question of fact by panicky conclusions as to *status quo*. The inconvenience of the escape of the horse does not prove that the barn door was shut. As a matter of fact, scientific historians, characterized by impartiality and objectivity of method, are not at all in the habit of "answering it with certainty." And their conscientious scruples are well grounded. For one thing, it is precisely at this point that the painting over of the historical picture of Jesus by the faith and adoration of the later community has been most pronounced. For another thing, Jesus himself, naturally—the deeper the secret, the finer-grained he was, the more certainly—would have observed chaste reticence concerning this nameless mystery of his person, concerning this his highest faith in himself. Finally, one must be oblivious to the universally accredited truths of epistemology, (according to which nothing is known simply as *given*, but only as *constructed* by the knower, who must use the concepts and content of his own consciousness), to suppose that by some strange alchemy we can release the Jesus-of-history from the Christ-of-faith, and thus see and hear the bare Jesus-in-himself. Has Kant's *Ding-an-sich* perished from metaphysics but to be enthroned in the center of biblical science?

It is on account of such considerations as these that Weinel's conception of scientific duty must be treated with respect, whatever be the "radical change" in Christianity supposed to be necessitated thereby. But is Dr. Denney right as to this further contention? His thought is: Christ's confession of faith is Christianity; Christ's confession of faith in himself is the kernel of Christianity. We know "with certainty" what this last is, and must make it our own; otherwise it is all over with Christianity. I have pointed out the difficulty as to this "certainty." It remains to ask whether it is required that we confess Christ's confession in order to be counted within the pale of Christianity. There are two decisive reasons to the contrary, one psychological, the other moral. If it be true that every man is a unique miracle, that the like of him was never born before and never will be again, then it is also true that every faith is unique in the world; then it is true for psychological reasons that I cannot confess what another man has believed, were this other man a Spurgeon, a Luther, a Paul, or even—as the case in question—Jesus himself. His faith would

be no warranty for my faith, the truth and sincerity of his confession would not prove the truth and sincerity of my confession—just as my being moral consists in my ability, not to “keep,” but inwardly to create, the Ten Commandments out of myself. But this is to trench upon the other reason: Dr. Denney’s position is legalistic—the legalism of the Jesus of history. In holding this position, orthodox Protestantism has moved a long way, inconsistently enough, from the external authority of a verbally inspired book; but the underlying principle is the same in both cases. To be moral, my valuation of Jesus must be mine and not his. It is not what I think of his dignity, but whether I possess his spirit or not, that determines whether I am his. How can I be sure how great Jesus was? He might be so great that I could not understand how great he was even if he had told me. But Jesus requires no blind faith. What the gospel that saves requires is that I confess not Jesus’ confession, but my own—with Jesus-like pains, courage, sincerity, and in the use of all the material at my disposal, of which he is chief, that will enable me to make a goodly confession. Even then it is as true today as ever that not everyone that saith to Jesus, “Lord, Lord,” or—*mutatis mutandis*—“Messiah, Messiah;” “second person in the Trinity, second person in the Trinity;” “Deity of Christ, Deity of Christ;” but he that doeth the will of his father. And if participating in the gospel that saves does not consist in making Jesus’ confession, certainly it does not consist in making the church’s.

How diverse that confession has been! First, Jesus was confessed to be the Jewish Messiah, the mighty lord of the judgment day, the restorer of Israel, the supernatural man who holds in one hand the sword of destruction, in the other the message of peace and reconciliation with God.

A century or so passes, and the Greek spirit replaces the Jewish. The bloody Messiah of the race of the Maccabees gradually vanishes from Christian feeling, and Jesus is confessed to be the radiant image of the Word of God, the Logos.

Other centuries have fled: the antique world is nauseated with itself; saints fly to wilderness and cloister; the wild joy of living is gone; the last word of wisdom is: forego fatherland, family, enjoyment, and the duties of society; the dominion of the monk has begun—and slowly the shining image of the Greek Logos-Jesus vanishes. On the horizon, like a pale moon, the sallow, faded countenance of the oriental Christ, the Byzantine Christ, is visible: the typical ideal of the monk and the ascetic.

Other centuries go by, and German peoples overrun Europe with their ignorance and rawness. The sluggish barbarian blood streams into the veins of the church. The light of antique culture is darkened. The

Greek Christ of an Origen and a Chrysostom no longer speaks to the people of the eleventh century. They cannot understand him. They need a God whom they can see or touch. They need a sensible representation of the Savior. And the priest hoists the host, and the church has a sensible Christ who communicates himself to these new confessors through their bodily organism.

More centuries pass. Luther and Calvin thunder. Renaissance awakens the human spirit. The Bible is given back to believers. A part of Christendom give up the mediæval Christ. Doctors of theology take the place of priests, and for two hundred years theological systems are the soul of the church and the strength on the field of battle. And, behold, Christ has become a doctor of theology, a cold Christ, exacting obedience, rationalistic, inexorable toward those who do not confess his confession.

The nineteenth century dawned. Some philosophers lifted their voices. There was a rebirth of liberty. Historical criticism was born. The theological Christ, like King Lear, is turned out in the street with none so poor as to do him reverence. A new *Christusbild* is produced. A new one, did I say? Rather, a whole art gallery of them: the romantic Christ, the socialistic Christ, the prophetic Christ, the mystic Christ, the rationalistic Christ, the idyllic Christ. It is a most instructive fact that there have never been so many as there have been since historians have undertaken to exhibit the history of his life. The lessons are obvious. If being a Christian consists in thinking about Jesus as he thought about himself, then Jesus is the only Christian that there is. "Christianity is Christ," we are told. Which Christ? "The Jesus-in-himself whom biblical science desires to see," comes the answer; "he is great, and I am his prophet." Which one of you? It is strange that the historians who apotheosize the historical in Christianity will learn no lesson on this matter from history. There is no Jesus in himself that you can get at to see; say what you will, he is no bare datum, but construct as well. Was there no Christianity in the world before the historical-science Jesus was exhibited to the world? Religion is grounded throughout upon its inner power and truth, not upon "historical arguments." Nothing in the past that is in the past only, and not also in the present, belongs to the essence of the gospel that saves and sanctifies the soul.

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